

Give me that Old-Time Religion
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Religion. It is a very loaded term in the modern age. It is often said, "You are not to talk about politics and religion; it's not polite." Yet, religion shapes many different things in this social fabric that is North America. Particularly during this past two decades, religion seems to be on the rise everywhere. In America, the religious right, the conservative political movement by religious fundamentalists, had won the day. In parts of the Islamic world, the Shari'a laws became the standard and many jihadists invoke their religion to destroy buildings and kill civilians. Even as I speak now it is reported that Arab and African immigrants in France are "rioting" in protest of the Summit of the Americas.

In the church communities, religion is a term often hated yet something they take very seriously. Often times religion is thought of as a set of doctrines: what one believes about the supreme reality, about the afterworld, about the cosmology, about divine revelations, and so on. Yet, a very typical response from a very typical evangelists is that "it's not a religion, but is a relationship with Jesus."

Now, how can one have a "relationship" with someone who no longer physically exists? How can one have a relationship with a memory of the dead, resurrected and raised? How can one have a relationship with *some people's idea* about who Jesus might have been?

And that "some people's ideas" are so different from one another's to the point where wars are waged in the name of the same singular master whom they all claim to serve. With the religion's in-fighting, hatred of the "other" and the rampant corruption and violence, "religion" became a dirty word.

One of the definitions of "religion" is a set of individual and communal exercises to symbolize the spirituality. Hence many rituals and liturgies are not significant in themselves but are meaningful only in representing what our eyes cannot physically perceive. The problem happens when two differing ideas about how to represent one single spiritual truth come to compete.

For instance, one of our forebears was called the Anabaptists. They were persecuted, tortured and murdered by both Roman Catholics and by the Protestant Reformers only because they believed differently about the symbolism of baptism.

When a religious leaders give an absolute, literal power to what is only symbolic, there is always a problem. The symbols, whether in forms of sacraments and rites, or in forms of sacred writings, are nonetheless symbols. They are just like signs and languages. The signs are not the substance of to which they point out. The languages are merely symbolic representations of realities. They are only good so far as they help us become closer to God and understand the divine truth better within the context of our intellectual and emotional backgrounds.

Even the word "God" poses a problem when we attempt to translate the idea of the monotheistic Hebrew deity called Yahweh or Elohim into another language. Bible translators used the word "kami" when translating "Elohim" into Japanese. The problem is that when a Japanese hears the word "kami" it symbolizes within her mind not Yahweh but the nature spirit of Shintoism. Those who translated the Bible into Chinese instead opted to use the term "Shangdi",

literally "the Emperor Above" or "the Supreme Emperor." The picture one can draw in her mind, again, will differ dramatically from when she hears the word "kami." In Korean, the same word is translated as "Hana-nim" or the "Honourable One Being." While this avoids the trap of representing monotheistic deity with something like "kami" but it lacks in the vivid mental picture one can draw.

Knowing that we the humans have many different languages and even many more ways of understanding those different languages, it is important not to idolize the symbols. The problem with religious fundamentalism starts when such idolization occurs. While fundamentalists believe that they are doing God a service by "literally" obeying "every single word of God," they are in fact approaching God through a very materialistic interpretation and because of that they are looking for God in all the wrong places.

This week's lectionary reading comes with some unusual quotes from what is called the Wisdom of Solomon. The Wisdom of Solomon is an apocryphal book that is accepted as part of the canonical scriptures by the Roman Catholics and to a lesser extent by some Anglicans. Most Protestants reject this book as being "not words of God." For those who may not be familiar with this, let me read these verses aloud:

The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her, and love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, and immortality brings one near to God; so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom. -- Wis. 6:17-20 (NRSV).

Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate. To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought. -- Wis. 6:12-16 (NRSV).

Now, what's up with all the "she" and "her"? Isn't the Bible all about the patriarchal triad of Father, Son and the Holy Ghost? Take a very close look at these texts: If you substitute "Wisdom" with "Yahweh" and "she" with "he", the text will make a complete sense to conventional Christians who are very much a product of the male-centred religious language and symbolism.

What is important is not how the words are visibly placed, but the deeper truths and wisdom beyond all the limitations of linguistic symbols. This, of course, is an affront to many those who call themselves "Bible-believing Christians" who believe every word of the Scriptures is divinely inspired and as such infallible. The problem, again, is that the Bible is a representation of God's truth and wisdom (a purely metaphysical and spiritual knowledge) in the day-to-day material languages of the ancient Middle Eastern cultures, that is later interpreted largely by the Europeans with the help of Greco-Roman philosophy. Without many of us knowing, Christianity had long ago become a religion of book-worship and symbol-worship. In the constant fighting over the book and symbols, spiritually meaningful and authentic connection to God have been lost and we began abusing and misusing the symbols and languages to cause great harms.

Unfortunately, religion gives us an illusion that we are always doing the right things even when we are completely off the target and doing what is grotesquely evil. In the name of

Christianity we murdered people who are different from us, we abused and tortured those who disagree with the minor points of doctrines, we allowed genocide, domestic violence, child abuse, political corruption, imperialism, and the list goes on. All for elevating symbols to the place of God.

The prophets' duty was to expose and uncover such problems with a faith, hope and expectation that the ordinary people will wake up and grow beyond the symbolism of religion and into the metaphysical and archetypal reality that was the original goal of the said religion. Judaism and Christianity once sought to show that individual humans are made in likeness and image of God, and that they can interact with God and voice their prayers to be heard. Over centuries, however, they became "peoples of the book" who have become so entrenched in the surface understanding of symbols that their religions became burdens for the common people and sources of corrupt power for the leaders.

This is why Amos the prophet sharply said:

Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?
I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. -- Amos 5:18-24 (NRSV).

The prophet made a point that all the orthodoxy and orthopraxy in doctrinal purity and religious observance are utterly meaningless to God when they take a life of their own and become a distraction from the eternal divine wisdom. This divine wisdom is what Solomon calls "Love of her [that] is the keeping of her laws, and giving [of] heed to her laws [that] is assurance of immortality." By "laws" it does not mean acts of legislature. It does not mean anything human-made, creations of institutions, for her laws are above, beyond and independent of all human institutions and power structures. Instead, this is an universal law, the *thamē*, similar to the laws of physics and the laws of mathematics. This is the kind of law that exists on its own from eternity to eternity, with or without our existence. How we talk of such laws, and how we symbolize them with our religious language, can be different -- whether one calls it Dao, or Dharma, or any other terms in any other human language -- but the essential truth is one and the same. This, of course, does not mean all beliefs are the same and equally correct; neither does it not mean that one human creation of religious institution is the only correct way of God and all others are false. What I mean is that we are all fallible beings on our path to seek God's wisdom. To receive "her laws," an arrogance of sectarian supremacism should have no place in our hearts. Instead, as the Wisdom of Solomon says, we must have "the most sincere desire for instruction." And this is a perpetually ongoing process. We never stop learning as long as we are alive in this physical universe. We must be unafraid and humble to be teachable by the Spirit of God at all times.

Sometimes a fresh eye on God can be opened when we try different ways of symbolizing the ultimate truth. See if there are many other ways and if one or two of such ways can better help God sink into the deepest depth of your soul. For a change, you might want to try another liturgical tradition or spiritual practice for a while. It can greatly widen your perspectives. For the more adventurous, try reading the Bible in other languages. Just as each language shapes the reality of its speakers differently from how others are perceiving the reality through their own languages, learning foreign languages and rediscovering the familiar sacred scriptures in other languages can have a profound effect on your spirituality.

If even this leaves you dissatisfied and you are willing, here's something you can do also; I know this can make a lot of us from traditional Christian background uncomfortable and this is indeed controversial; however I think that this is an example of how we as Church became so deeply entrenched in the surface symbolism and lost sight of the essence: Try replacing the word "God" with, say, "Dea." Dea is the feminine form of the Latin word for God; I avoid the term "Goddess" here because of the different connotation that comes from the diminutive suffix. By "Dea" I mean that she is supreme and not subservient to anyone. Then, replace the word "Lord" (or all-capped LORD) with "Raya." Again, this is a feminine form of the proto-Indo-European word for the Sovereign -- sharing the same root with the Latin "rex" and French "roi."

Now, try drawing a mental picture as you read a few Bible verses with replaced words. You may find a lot of obstacles, entrenchments and hang-ups fall off from what you read and your eyes being gradually opened to a more spiritual principles behind the words and lines.

This is something I brought up for three reasons.

One: There are people among us who stay away from God because our religious symbols trigger negative emotions and remind them of the evil done to them. Two: Because we often make idols of doctrine, liturgy and many other religious symbols, and we have become too comfortable in the self-made fortress that keep us inside and keep others away. And three: Jesus and his disciples reached out to many different nations and languages, beyond their Jewish culture. Eventually the Gospel became rooted in the indigenous cultures of Europe and from which grew what is known today as Christianity.

If the European hyper-patriarchy and resulting materialism shaped the way we have come to hear the Gospel, even though they have very little to do with the culture or symbolism Jesus of Nazareth had as a Jew, then it may be necessary for some of us to break free from such religious symbols to find a greater connection with the divine.

Love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, and immortality brings one near to God; so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom. (6:18-20)

This week's lectionary texts:

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Psalm 78:1-7 or

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16 or Amos 5:18-24

Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20 or Psalm 70

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

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